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ABSTRACT

In contrast to a common set of roles or definitions, it is a common sense of mission that unifies practitioners in the field of early childhood education. Successful missions in time become transformed into organizational sagas that capture the allegiance and commitment of a group. Early childhood educators can increase their commitment to the field and its mission by immersing themselves in its saga, thereby strengthening their identity with members. The saga of early childhood education includes such still-relevant issues as (1) when children should start formal schooling; (2) the extent to which kindergarten experiences should include academic or preacademic content; (3) the extent to which early childhood education functions as an agent of social change; (4) what the role of women in contemporary American society should be; and (5) changing conceptions of knowledge and content in early childhood education. Professionalism in early childhood educators also is rooted in this sense of mission and in the saga of early childhood education. (RH)

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THE PAST AS PROLOGUE: EXPLORING THE HISTORIC ROOTS OF PRESENT DAY CONCERNS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION*

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It is interesting to me that, in the past few years, the AERA Meetings have been held so close to Passover. Passover is a very special holiday. It celebrates the flight of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, an event that has had symbolic meaning for many people. The primary ritual of Passover is the Seder, or service. The family gathers at home and retells the story of the flight from Egypt. All the details and interpretations of the story are explored. Special foods are eaten on those nights, each symbolizing some aspect of the Passover story.

Each year our family would gather and repeat the same ritual. Even today, we engage in the Seder in my home, repeating the service and retelling the story.

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The ritual, service, and historic tale seem always to have been a part of me. It seemed that my family had gone through a struggle for freedom and liberty in each generation. This continual conflict eventually led my father and mother to migrate to the United States. The holiday, the service and the retelling of the story provided me with a direct link through many generations to the survivors of the Biblical flight from Egypt.

There is one other historic celebration that I remember vividly...

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Thanksgiving was more a school celebration for me than a family celebration. Each November we were told the story of the first Thanksgiving, of the joint celebration of Pilgrims and Indians. We drew pictures of that first Thanksgiving, and made construction paper hats or caps along with paper collars to wear in our reenactment of that event. We decorated our classrooms, and cooked and served scaled-down versions of the Thanksgiving feast.

I cannot recall our family ever serving the traditional Thanksgiving dinner at home while growing up. For one thing, turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie were not our traditional family foods. For another, it was hard for us to relate to the legend of Thanksgiving. Both my parents had come from Eastern Europe less than ten years before I was born; neither had roots in England. As a child, Thanksgiving always seemed an alien, somewhat empty holiday and ritual.

When I taught young children, I took them through the same Thanksgiving ritual. I sometimes wondered if they, with their varied backgrounds, had as difficult a time in associating themselves with the Pilgrims. Did the class of Puerto Rican children I taught in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn have the same sense of alienation that I had experienced?

Interestingly, Thanksgiving has become an important ritual in my family now. In time I had developed the association with the sentiments and the people of the first Thanksgiving. Both of these celebrations with their reenactment of the rituals and the telling of stories served to make the history and traditions of each culture a part of me. In following the biblical instruction to retell the story of Passover each year, each new generation of Jews has been helped to feel as if they themselves had

participated in the Exodus. Similarly, in retelling the story of Thanksgiving each year, each new generation of Americans have been allowed to feel as if their forbears had actually participated in the original feast, no matter where they came from or when they arrived. The repeated rituals and the continued retelling of the legends helped to acculturate us all.

* * *

It seems to me that just as one comes to identify with a culture and a country, by being immersed in its history and its traditions, so one comes to identify with a field and a profession. Early Childhood Education has gone through much professional soul searching in recent years, seeking ways to unify and better define itself in a number of ways. In searching for defining and unifying forces in our field, it has seemed to me that what holds our field together is not a common specific task, or common set of entry requirements, or common names for practitioners. Rather it is a common core of beliefs that unifies our actions no matter which of the many ways each of us serves young children.

Recently, I came across a set of concepts related to distinctive institutions that, I believe, can also help us understand a distinctive field. Burton Clark (1970), in writing of the distinctive colleges (Antioch, Reed, Swarthmore), presents the concept of the organizational saga, relating it to the organizational role and organizational mission.

The concepts of mission and organizational saga can be fruitfully applied to the field of early childhood education. Organizations, like individuals, have roles, or ways of behaving, associated with their positions in a social system. An organizational role consists of both a basic way of performing and a place among organizations. An organization may drift into a role, or it may actively seek it, defining its own character and

place in society. Missions are related to these roles, becoming statements of purpose, guideposts, or direction.

Successful missions in time become transformed into organizational sagas. The saga tells what the organization has been in the past and what it is today--thus it sets a direction for what it will be in the future. The saga is an historically based, somewhat embellished understanding of the development of a unique organization. It defines the organization and suggests common characteristics of its members. The definitions are internalized and become a part of each individual's motives, relating the current members of an organization to those of times past.

An organizational saga captures the allegiance and commitment of a group. Members of the organization define themselves in terms of its theme. Deep emotional investment binds members together as comrades in a common cause. Indications of an organizational saga are pride, exaggeration, and an intense sense of the unique (Clark, 1970).

What holds us together as the field of early childhood education is not a common set of roles, or a set of definitions, but rather a common sense of mission. No matter what each of us does in our job, we are all committed to enhancing the education, development and well-being of young children, persons who cannot protect themselves. We are not perfect in our performance. But what we do, we do better than anyone else and with greater commitment. As long as each of us remains in the field, we are committed to the fulfillment of the mission.

We can increase our commitment to the field and to its mission by immersing ourselves in its saga, strengthening our identity with members of the field and with our mission. Just as the retelling of the story of the Exodus from Egypt helps to bind each generation to a Thanksgiving story

and the retelling of the tradition, so the awareness of the history of our field, its saga, helps practitioners identify with the field and its mission. A sense of belonging can develop through an awareness and an understanding of this history, making each of us a part of a larger group that extends beyond us in time as well as in space and becoming aware that the problems and issues we face are rooted in human concerns that transcend us.

In seeking out pieces of the saga of early childhood education, I have identified a few issues that are relevant today which also confronted early childhood educators in eras past. I would like to present a few of these.

I

When Should Children Start Formal Schooling?

In the N.Y. Times of January 26 and 27, 1983, the New York State Commissioner of Education was reported as proposing that children enter and leave school at an earlier age. "We have a lot of experimental work on the prekindergarten level, and we find that the effects of starting students earlier are substantial and lasting," he said.

For most of us, first grade always enrolled 6-year-olds and kindergartens have been provided for 5's. School did not always begin at the age six in our country. In 1647, according to Kaestle and Vinovskis (1978), the Massachusetts general court enacted a law requiring that towns establish schools for young children. The Puritans were concerned that all people be able to read the Bible, and that instruction to that end should begin as soon as possible. Cotton Mather, a colonial preacher, is quoted as saying, "The children should learn to read the Holy Scriptures; and this, as early as may be..." Children were often taught to read at

age three or four then, while Latin instruction might begin at age five or six.

After statehood, schools in Massachusetts became secular institutions. By the beginning of the 19th century, most towns in that state offered schooling to the young and school attendance remained high. In 1826, 5% of all children below the age of 4, including 20% of all three-year-olds, were enrolled in school. At about this time, the Infant School, which had been developed in Britain by Robert Owen, was introduced into the United States and became quite popular. These schools enrolled children as young as eighteen months. Infant school programs were more activity-oriented than those of the primary school and many parents felt that their young children could be more effectively taught in infant schools than either at home or in existing primary schools.

In the next two decades the infant school movement faded and there was a sharp reduction in the enrollment of very young children in public schools. A number of reasons are given for the declining enrollment of the young, including (1) an increased emphasis on the role of the mother at home, including her role in educating her young children; (2) a greater concern for the balanced development of young children, including a fear that excessive intellectual activity in young children could cause insanity; and (3) the growing bureaucracy of the public school which, in the 1840s and 1850s sought to exclude, not only the under-fours, but 4-year-olds and 5-year-olds as well. The reasons given included concern for the well-being of young children as well as the well-being of the school, including better attendance, more disciplined classes, and financial savings (May & Vinovskis, 1977). The introduction of the kindergarten to the American educational scene in the latter half of the nineteenth century provided a more humane approach to educating young children.

II

Kindergarten and Early Reading

A great deal of attention has been given in recent years to changes in kindergarten programs (Spodek, 1982). While there has long been a concern for teaching academics or preacademics in kindergarten, the demands for such content seems to have heightened in recent years. A November 11, 1982 article in the N.Y. Times was titled "Preschool Classes Stress Early Learning." The gist of the article may be found in the following brief excerpt:

> "While a wide variety of preschool programs still exist, the 1980's may see more and more kindergartners pouring over readers, workbooks and ditto sheets. Pressure to cover academic subjects so early, most kindergarten teachers agree, is coming from anxious parents. Parental insistence on pre-first-grade reading programs may stem in part from general mistrust of educational institutions.
>
> ...While some teachers support this shift in kindergarten curriculum, many fear that the urgency with which it is being carried out may not be in the best interests of their charges."

The pressure to include reading in kindergarten programs is over one hundred years old. Anna Coe conducted a demonstration kindergarten, one of several mounted for the 1876 Philadelphia Exposition, in which she encouraged such activities as reading and writing in her class. Elizabeth Peabody, then the leading advocate of the Froebelian kindergarten, objected to this class being falsely advertised as an exhibit of kindergarten methods. Coe's program was defended as providing a way of Americanizing the kindergarten idea (Ross, 1976). Interestingly, Milton Bradley, a manufacturer of games and "kindergarten toys" modified the "kindergarten blocks" for the American Market and presented his revised version at the Centennial exhibition. On each side of the cube, a carved

letter of the alphabet was presented (Shapiro, 1983). Again, as a way of reaching the American public, the press for literacy training had begun to push aside the original thrust of Froebel's Symbolic education.

To this day, we seem to suffer from the dilemma of determining what an American kindergarten should be like and when reading instruction should begin. While research alone is not capable of making that determination, it is helpful to study not only the consequences of introducing such instruction on children, but on kindergartens as well.

III

Early Childhood Education as an Agent of Social Change

Robert Owen's infant school, established in England in 1816, was rooted in a number of social reforms. The infant school was part of Owen's Institution for the Formation of Character. Owen believed that man's character was developed for him through teaching as well as through the impact of environmental conditions. He also believed that things learned early in life had serious consequences for the developing individual. Thus early education was viewed by him as especially effective (Spodek, 1973).

Owen's infant school idea spread beyond his mill town. By 1825 there were at least 55 infants schools in England, Scotland and Ireland, along with a number of infant school societies. Owen's books were circulated throughout Continental Europe and the United States. By 1827 infant schools were being established in Hartford, Connecticut, New York City, Philadelphia, Boston, and other American cities. Robert Owen himself came to the United States during this period and lectured extensively about his new views of society and about education. He purchased the

settlement of New Harmony, Indiana, from the Rappites, a religious group, and set his son up to establish a communitarian society there along with an infant school. Both the school and the community had serious problems and failed. By the mid 1830's the infant school movement in America had faded.

The infant schools were felt to embody the humane innovations and principles of education that could prove valuable to the public primary schools. More important, they were underwritten by social reformers who saw them as ways of combatting the ills of urban life. Infant schools, they believed, could permanently eliminate poverty by educating and socializing young children from poor families. They provided a means for both moral and literary instruction for the children of the urban poor while at the same time freeing their mothers for work (May and Vinovskis, 1977).

Less than a quarter of a century after the demise of the infant school movement, the Froebelian kindergarten was introduced to the United States. Kindergartens came to serve many purposes within our country. Churches considered them as a valuable means of carrying on their mission work both at home and abroad. The Women's Christian Temperance Union established kindergartens to provide aid to families of alcoholics. Labor unions and businesses also sponsored kindergartens. In addition, kindergartens were established by charity groups in slum areas for poor children. Settlement houses, such as Hull House in Chicago, sponsored kindergarten programs as part of their wide offerings (Spodek, 1982). The typical kindergarten teacher in those days spent half her day working with children and the other half working with parents, advising mothers on matters of child rearing, hygiene, diet, and morality.

The first nursery school was established in London, England, at the turn of the century to serve children of the poor. Margaret McMillan was aware of the health and nutritional problems of poor children. Convinced that many of their deficiencies could be corrected or prevented prior to their entrance into the primary school, she established the nursery school.

Margaret McMillan felt that children could not develop properly unless they were healthy during their formative years. They required proper medical attention, adequate nutrition, cleanliness, fresh air, exercise, and living in a healthy environment. She labeled the concept of supporting total development: nurture. Education could only operate in an environment that protected the health and welfare of children. McMillan also placed a high premium on teaching for creativity. Educating the imagination was as important for children of workers as for children of managers, especially if working class children were to serve as leaders in society. As nursery schools evolved and came to serve many purposes, this original set of purposes was diluted (Spodek, 1973).

Edward Zigler and Karen Anderson, in writing of the beginning of Head Start suggest that it was the first early childhood program to serve the many needs of the poor. Head Start was and is unique in using federal resources to provide a comprehensive child development program for a large number of children and their families. But the use of comprehensive child development programs to help children and their parents cope with poverty and to attack the social evils of urban society has its roots in the development of the Infant School more than one hundred and fifty years ago, in the establishment of philanthropic and settlement house kindergartens more than one hundred years ago, and in the creation of the nursery school in this century, with its comprehensive program of medical care, nutrition, hygiene, social service and education.

IV

What Should the Role of Women Be in Our Society?

The greatest change in the field of early childhood education during the past decade has been the tremendous growth of day care services in the United States. This growth can be attributed both to the increase in the number of mothers of young children in the work force and, relatedly, the changing role of women in our society. A large proportion of young children were enrolled in our educational institutions until about the mid 1800s, as noted earlier. The change in enrollment patterns has been attributed, at least in part, to the evolution of what was then called "Fireside Education."

According to Charles Strickland (1982), the women and clergymen who promoted the cause of "Fireside Education" viewed the nuclear family as a sacred institution, with the home serving a more important role than the church in preserving religious values. The home was the repository for the expressive values of love, warmth, and intimacy, in contrast to the cold competitiveness of the marketplace. Women had important tasks to perform as mothers and cultural arbiters. They were endowed by nature, the parent educators insisted, with superior moral character and superior intuitive insight, being less interested than men in sexual passion and endowed with greater capacity for tenderness and a greater sensitivity to others.

The picture of the Victorian woman and the Victorian family was limiting and erroneous. In reality, many women had to be out of the home and could not dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to their children. Strickland suggests that the idealized picture of the education of the young at the knees of their mothers has led to a neglect of the needs of

many children, especially children of the poor, in our society. Most women do not have the resources to allow them to be home at all times or the competency to raise and educate their children, both morally and intellectually, without help.

The legacy of this period is still with us. Calls for the development of day care centers and other support systems to provide for the care and education of the young, are countered by the argument that to wrest young children from the bosom of their families prematurely would play havoc with our cultural, social, moral, and even economic system. Day care systems have been accused of destroying family life, of keeping children from enjoying the close warm relationships to be found only in the home.

The myth of "Fireside Education" that evolved before the Civil War is still being perpetuated today. Just as children were denied early educational opportunities outside the home then, and just as women were burdened with guilt if they sought services for their children outside the home then, so women and children are being denied and being burdened today.

V

Changing Conceptions of Knowledge and Changing Conceptions of Content in Early Childhood Education

During the colonial period, the primary schools which young children attended were mainly concerned with literacy. Literacy was the foundation of education, since the ability to read gave the individual direct access to the Bible. Schools at all levels were taught or supervised by ministers. When Thomas Jefferson attended the College of William and Mary, all but one of the faculty members was an ordained minister.

Since the middle ages, the Bible was seen as the source of knowledge in Western society. When a theory or a set of observations were not consistent with the teaching of the Bible, that theory of observations was considered in error. Thus, when Galileo began charting the skies and determined that the sun rather than the earth was the center of the universe, he was considered in error since his theory ran counter to the view of the universe presented in the Bible.

As the period of the Enlightenment developed, it became more generally accepted that there were other views of the world besides that presented in the Bible and there were other ways of validating knowledge besides recourse to the Scriptures. During this Age of Reason we began to see rationalism and empiricism evolve as significant conceptions of knowledge and, with these developments, changes in early childhood curriculum.

Rationalism provided the epistemological basis for the Froebelian kindergarten. Rationalism held that truths were composed of self-evident premises that were not derived from experience but were held to be logically and undeniably true. Froebel's view of the world suggested that the key idea was the unity of man, God and nature. This and related ideas were presented to children through a set of materials and activities that symbolized them: the gifts, the occupations, and the mothers songs and plays. The ideas themselves were never tested in the program, nor was there a concern with helping children understand objective reality, except as how that reality reflected those ideas.

Empiricism gave the central role in knowledge to sense perceptions. One comes to know the world as a result of one's experiences. The information generated by those experiences is internalized through one's senses. To become more knowledgeable, one must have a greater number or range of experiences and a greater sensitivity to the external world.

The development of the Montessori Method reflected the belief that man's knowledge results from experiences. Montessori education is sensory education. Children are trained through apparatus which isolate particular attributes of experiences, helping children become aware of resulting sensations, and learning to order them. Children discriminate between and order objects by their color, size, weight or shape.

Sensations, however, do not generate meanings. While the colors or shapes of an object are inherent within the object itself, the ways in which we classify objects and put them into a sequence, are independent of the objects themselves and of our sensory experiences with them. It is the structure that we apply to our experiences that give them meaning.

In recent years early childhood programs have been developing based upon the research and theory of Jean Piaget. Piaget viewed knowledge as resulting from something more than a person's experience. The child or adult constructs knowledge through the application of mental processes. The mental structures created by the individual interact with sensory information in the creation of knowledge. Knowledge is neither simply the accumulation of sensory experiences nor the accumulation of innate ideas, but rather it is a human creation that uses sensory data--information resulting from experiences--to create ideas that can be tested against additional experience, to be discarded, elaborated, modified or affirmed.

Programs of early childhood education based upon this theory of constructivism, as it is presently being called, require that children be active learners, active both in accumulating experiences and in acting upon or thinking about those experiences to create their own mental structures. These programs represent not only a progression in our conceptions of child development, but a progression in our conceptions of knowledge.

* * *

I have presented a number of issues that concern us in early childhood education today. I have briefly explored some of the historical roots of each of these issues. History does not provide ready-made resolutions of issues, nor does it make them less important or less pressing. Rather, an historical perspective can expand our understanding of what is involved in an issue. An awareness of the roots of these issues also puts us into a different relationship with other early childhood educators, present and past. We are not alone. We are not and have not been the only ones that have been confronted with these issues.

In addition, we can come to understand that the way in which we resolve an issue today does not necessarily put that issue to rest forever. Issues arise again and again, as new understandings help us to see new facets of issues and as cultural change modifies the context and thus the nature of issues.

I could have chosen to explore the history of early childhood education in other ways. It could have traced the development of institutions through time or focussed on the lives and thoughts of historical figures in early childhood education. I chose to be issue oriented.

The details of what I have presented are less important than my intent: the sharing of some part of the saga of early childhood education. When we became early childhood educators, each of us accepted as our own, either deliberately or implicitly, the mission that is central to our field. Although each of us may do different things in our roles as early childhood educators, a common thread runs through our roles: we are committed to enhancing the education, development and well-being of young children.

An important way to renew our sense of identity with the field, our sense of oneness with those who share our commitment, is in the telling of our saga. We need to know about the history of our field, to become more aware of elements of the saga of early childhood education to enhance our identity. In immersing ourselves in the legends of early childhood education we become as one with other early childhood educators, both past and present. We link ourselves together through this knowledge of history. I firmly believe that in this sense of mission and in this immersion in the saga of early childhood education are the roots of our professionalism.

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